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Integration of visual art for small worshipping communities

Introduction

A difficulty for small worshipping communities is having the resources and personnel to provide suitable enervating opportunities for reflection on the Word during worship that enriches and enlivens their community action. Research has shown that interaction with visual imagery assists contemplation and integration of text and will therefore assist those gathered to consider the Scripture of the day.

Visual imagery in art has been neglected as a source of theology and hence the vocabulary needed to 'read' the artworks relevant to Scripture will have to be re-learned. This paper will provide an understanding of how visual arts can augment Scriptural understanding and the interaction within a small community. A list of symbols, attributes and emblems will be provided with visual examples so that this technique can be explored. Images are readily available through online sources and this augments the capacity of the small worshipping community to develop their resources.

Unlike large worshipping communities, the small community has the capacity to hear the voice of each person and therefore the response of each person to the visual art under consideration can deeply enrich the understanding of the Gospel in the community's own context. As William Dryness says: "A carefully wrought and intelligent object or painting, when it is patiently observed, opens up windows on the human situation in a way that other cultural products cannot."¹ Such patient observance, when linked to Scripture, can beautifully augment the small community gathered in worship.

Christianity's visible God

Christian art has a rich history dating back to the third century. Since the earliest paintings on the walls of catacombs, Christians have sought to express the invisible God through visible means. Even though Christians' origins were in Judaism where such imagery was forbidden, the fact of the Incarnation made it necessary to image the human face of God in Jesus Christ. Portraiture was never the intent, but an image which could open the mind, heart and soul in a way that enlivened faith and understanding was critically important for many centuries and saw the Church establish itself as the principal patron of the arts.

Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI) draws on the richness of Christian iconography because the tradition that he appreciates so deeply teaches that the Gospel is preached through images as well as the spoken word.

Artists in every age have offered the principal facts of the mystery of salvation to the contemplation and wonder of believers by presenting them in the splendour of colour and in the perfection of beauty. It is an indication of how today more than ever, in a culture of images, a sacred image can express much more than what can be

¹ William A. Dryness, *Visual Faith: art, theology, and worship in dialogue*, (Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2007), 19.

said in words, and be an extremely effective and dynamic way of communicating the Gospel message.²

Within our worship spaces and within the experience of a small worshipping community, images can strengthen the understanding of the Gospel. Western contemporary visual culture includes video as a means of transference of images. The word ‘video’ comes from the Latin *videre* which means ‘to see’. Communicating a message in the contemporary world to people reliant on a visual culture requires the stimulation of our visual sense yet when we come to worship we are so often simply washed over with words leaving our visual world blank. As Bishop Geoffrey Robinson puts it: “the congregation is asked to sit or stand passively while many thousands of words are poured over it, so many that not even the greatest saint could listen to each one of them.”³ For TV generations where a 30 second advertisement delivers vast numbers of images, to rely on only the spoken word for the Gospel can be a limiting experience. People “remember about 30% of what is spoken and 70% of what we see”⁴, hence, if we do not engage in visual media then we are not opening ourselves to a further means of receiving the Gospel. Saturation of images and moving details can also be problematic within worship so the balance between good visual stimulation and an endless range of images being flung at the congregation needs to be carefully established.

This paper will give a brief background to Christian art, a theological outline and finally, a practical way of using art within a small worshipping community.

Christian Art

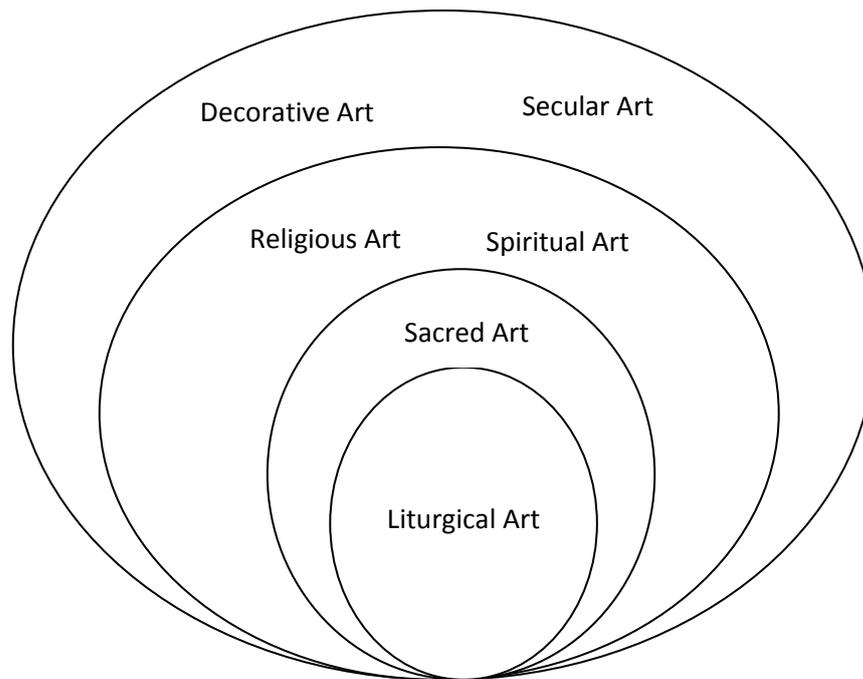
Art that expresses religious cultural truth has existed since the beginning of humankind. As our ancestors wondered about the meaning of things they developed an understanding of the existence of “Other”, the something-out-there that was important to the beginning of all things. As humankind has grown in complexity so has our response to the spiritual aspect of our being. Perhaps it is possible to categorise the kinds of artistic responses that people have made to the spiritual nature of things and the environment in which they live through the diagram below in Figure 1.

² Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, “Introduction” in *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, (2005), 17.

³ Geoffrey Robinson, *Love’s Urgent Longings; wrestling with belief in today’s church*, (Mulgrave: John Garratt Publishing, 2010), 80).

⁴ Anthony D. Coppedge in Eileen D. Crowley, *Liturgical Art for a Media Culture*, (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2007), 47.

Figure 1.



In the mid twentieth century, Crowley describes how Joseph Gelineau developed a taxonomy to illustrate the differences in liturgical music. She proposes that a similar taxonomy can apply to art which supports the diagram above and the description of the proposed categories.⁵

Decorative and Secular art can link into the spiritual in many circumstances that are not expressly spiritual. We are very familiar in our contemporary world with this kind of art. Art is no longer limited to museums but is part of the consumerist world. Artists are employed in ever increasing fields of design from fashion to industry, from sunglasses to the design of a manufacturing plant. The strong development in this area of art in the contemporary world is because the patronage of artists has shifted from the religious sector to the commercial sector.⁶

Religious and spiritual art tap into those subjects that lead us to explore aspects of “Other”, the divine, God. Such art can be purely exploring or expressing things of the spiritual aspect of human nature, or some can be connected to a particular body of religious thought and belief. The major world religions such as Christianity, Judaism, Islam and Hinduism all have rich expressions of their beliefs through art. Some are representational, others are not. In the Medieval and Renaissance periods religious and spiritual themes in art were used to decorate many dwellings, (not only places of worship), with the intention of keeping spiritual and religious ideas in the consciousness of the occupants. As Renaissance artists became bound up in the rapid developments of philosophy and political discourse, some paintings became religious in content but not religious in style.⁷ For example, Andrea del Sarto (1486-1530)⁸ painted an image called the ‘Madonna of the Harpies’. It includes St Francis of Assisi and a

⁵ Crowley, 16.

⁶ Dryness, 17.

⁷ Doug Adams, “Criteria in Styles of Visual Arts for Liturgy”, *Worship*, 54,4, (1980), 350.

⁸ *A Biographical Dictionary of Artists*, accessed at: <http://www.credoreference.com.peacez.hd.edu.au>, date accessed 10 November, 2010.

young St John the evangelist. Even though the content is very obviously religious, it does not lead us to any religious truth. Mary holds Jesus her son in her arms while standing on a pedestal, supported by two young angels, and the Harpies, winged and destructive characters from Greek mythology, are cast in stone in the pedestal. This does not have any echo in Scripture, nor does it draw the viewer into any deep religious truth about God or humankind. Mary is presented as a goddess, an idea that is much more aligned to the Renaissance rejuvenation of classical works rather than any true understanding of Mary and her role in salvation.

In the contemporary environment an expression of the reverse (religious style but no religious content) can be seen in the winning entry of the Blake Prize for 2010 “if you put your ear close you’ll hear it breathing” by Leonard Brown. Brown speaks of the use of humour in the title and also of the “Three dimensionality of reality... the word breath and breathing... a poetic and theological reference... the creative breath of God, the breath of the Holy Spirit, breath synonymous with life”⁹. It is an abstract work which reveals no religious content but is religious in style since the artists draws the viewer into his understanding of the connection between God and life.

With the decline of religious art in the twentieth century came the production of religious objects that have barely been touched by the human hand such as plaster cast statues, luminescent plastic objects representing Jesus, his mother Mary and various saints that proliferated as pious objects but could never be defined as works of art. Such things seem to be entirely contrary to the definition of religious art. Pope John Paul II wrote about how works of art “speak of their authors; they enable us to know their inner life, and they reveal the original contribution which artists offer to the history of culture”.¹⁰ It could be argued that many Australian churches have no art to uplift the minds of the faithful, but have images that focus narrowly on a pious aspect of devotion and do not enliven Scripture or the teachings of the Church.

Sacred art is art that is used for sacred purposes and therefore has a connection with the faithful.¹¹ Sacred art aims to lead the faithful to understand the things of God and to enter into the presence of God. Prayer is often an integral part of the experience of sacred art. Icons belong to this category. While they are not intended to be representational images, icons fully intend to lead the viewer into the sacred using symbolic visual language. This can be seen in the specific nature of their use of visual perspective. Instead of the lines of perspective diminishing with distance to a focal point, they are reversed so that the most diminished point is the viewer. In the case of many Christian icons, use of this device draws the viewer into the icon and into the inverse perspective of the Gospel where the ‘first shall be last’.¹² Icons are deeply connected to both Scripture and the Tradition of the Church in that they are theology

⁹ Leonard Brown, video explanation accessed online at: <http://www.blakeprize.com.au/news/blake-prize-2010-winner-leonard-brown>

¹⁰ Pope John Paul II, *Letter of His Holiness Pope John Paul II to Artists*, 1999, accessed at: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_23041999_artists_en.html, date accessed, 10 November, 2010.

¹¹ Crowley, 16.

¹² Adams, 354.

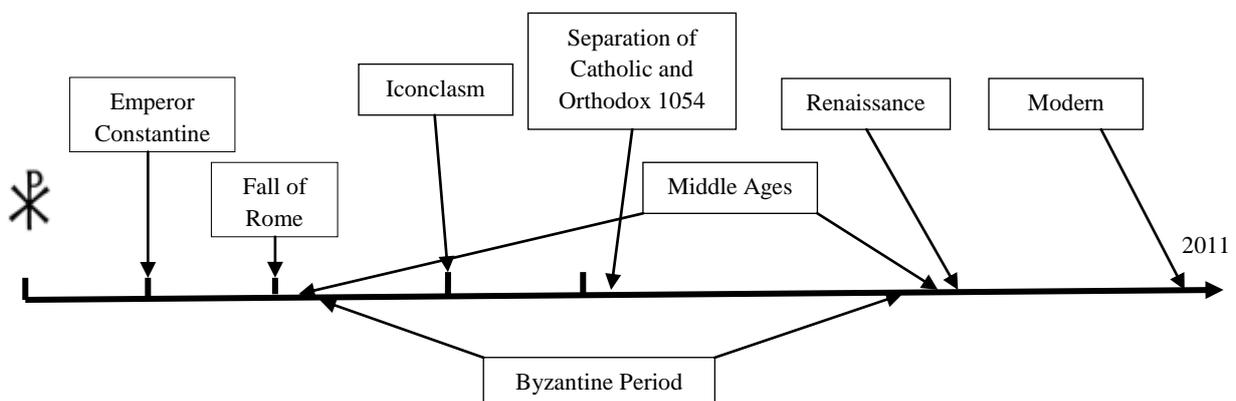
written through images but they are rarely signed as the person who writes the icon does not purport to have produced an original work or art but to have transcribed theological ideas into a visual medium. They become truly sacred items because they are ‘written’ with a great deal of ritual and prayer, they draw us apart from the ordinariness of life into the life of the sacred. They can also be considered as a form of liturgical art when they are specifically related to the Liturgy.

Liturgical art is art of the liturgy¹³ which, in the Christian sense, is the public work of the Church for God and God’s work for us. Liturgy is highly refined, ancient in form and deeply symbolic. Icons, sacred vessels, furniture, adornments in sacred spaces – all belong to the category of liturgical art, they exist for the purposes of liturgy. Other sacred art can be within sacred spaces but it is only liturgical art if it is used in the course of the liturgy. It is “integral and appropriate to the liturgical actions of a community’s liturgy.”¹⁴

These are very broad categories and are useful only as such, but they can help to determine what kind of art is useful in a small worshipping community to open up the Gospel.

Historical Overview

A brief overview of the history of Christian art is also useful as it helps to distinguish the different areas of Christian art and therefore can help in the choices made when reflecting on the Sunday Gospel upon which the worshipping community is to reflect. We need to respect the different traditions that have developed in Christian art and not just treat it as a smorgasbord where we taste along the way. It is advisable to work within one particular tradition or period and investigate the history of that particular time and cultural style in order to respect the integrity of that era.



The earliest Christian art is generally dated from the 3rd century and is found in the catacombs either as wall paintings or funerary objects and reflects the style of the Greco Roman culture. Once Emperor Constantine issued the Edict of Milan in 313, Christianity emerged as a legitimate religion and eventually became dominant with strong imperialistic aspects to its style.¹⁵ Artistic styles differed between the East (Byzantine) and the West (Roman). The fall

¹³ Crowley, 17.

¹⁴ Crowley, 13.

¹⁵ J.F. Kelly, *The World of the Early Christians*, Vol. 1, Message of the Fathers of the Church, Ed. T. Halton. (Collegeville, The Liturgical Press, 1997) 137.

of Rome caused Europe to enter into a chaotic time and the monasteries during this time became guardians of religious art with beautiful examples to be found in the illumination of texts. The Byzantine Empire was not subject to the disarray of Europe and the development in this area included icons and mosaics of extraordinary splendour. It was interrupted by the issue of iconoclasm for around 100 years but that was settled by the Second Council of Nicea in 787 and the creation of images of Christ and the saints continued.

Western art richly developed over the Middle Ages which ran almost parallel to the Byzantine Period and concluded with the beginning of the Renaissance. Art historians describe a number of different periods following the Renaissance with modern art beginning in the late 19th century. Contemporary art today is often classified as postmodern. During the time of the High Middle Ages, beginning in the 12th century, Christian art was strongly promoted by Church patronage and carefully informed by theologians and hence this period is a rich source of art for use in contemplating the Gospel. A symbolic language was well developed and used so that the faithful, who were mostly illiterate, could read the Gospel that was painted on the walls. One of the difficulties with modern and post-modern art is that it is not always theologically informed and is often reliant solely on the artist's own background and level of understanding. This can result in the use of ideas that are not recognisable within the traditional language of Christian art.

A Theology of Christian Art

This paper does not attempt to present a full theology of Christian art, but to give a very brief overview. Broadly speaking, theologies of Christian art come from two centrepieces: some are Christological/Incarnational, others are Trinitarian. To remain solely Christological can limit the connectedness of art and theology. Jesus Christ is the presence of God in the world, God become Incarnate, but in that presence the Holy Spirit is active and the means by which incarnation became a reality and brought human kind into a new relationship with the Father.¹⁶ Human creativity must be located “within the call of the Spirit to glorify the Father through Jesus Christ”¹⁷ and so all artistic activity can be an invitation to share in the essence of beauty at the core of all of creation.

Through the person of Jesus of Nazareth we can ‘see’ God as declared by Paul in the Letter to the Colossians (1:15). John further declares that “He who has seen me has seen the Father” (14:9). This is richly Trinitarian as the Son, made incarnate through the power of the Holy Spirit, makes the invisible God visible. Such an action of God is the centre of beauty. “This divine beauty elicits the human response of faith and is given material form in works of Christian art.”¹⁸

We receive the beauty of art with the mind and the senses. Langer uses the term “organ of the mind”¹⁹ because as we receive the beauty with our physical senses, our minds filter it personally and culturally. What we receive through art is in a language that is not discursive

¹⁶ Dryness, 92.

¹⁷ Ibid, 93

¹⁸ Jem Sullivan, *The Beauty of Faith: Using Christian Art to Spread the Good News*, (Huntingdon, Our Sunday Visitor Inc, 2009), 54.

¹⁹ Suzanne Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*, (New York, New American Library, 1951), 84.

and so we can have experiences of God through image as well as through text. Therefore our image of God and our experience of God will be “greatly enriched by the use of visual language as well as by the texts and spoken words that we use in such a variety of ways.”²⁰

Christian Art and the Gospel

At the heart of the Gospel is the experience of Jesus Christ. Using visual art to enrich the experience of the Gospel engages the faithful in an intellectual, spiritual, emotional and sensory dialogue with beauty that deepens the experience of Christ in a personal and communal way. Unlike large worshipping communities, the small community has the capacity to hear the voice of each person and therefore the response of each person to the visual art under consideration can deeply enrich the understanding of the Gospel in the community’s own context. When a community patiently and carefully observes and contemplates a work of art the experience opens an understanding of the God/humankind relationship in a way that is unique. Such patient observance, when linked to Scripture, can beautifully augment the small community gathered to contemplate the Gospel within their weekly worship gathering.

Contemporary access to images of artworks can occur with unprecedented ease through the use of the internet. Communities will have the tools as there will always be someone who can access the internet and the resources needed to gather relevant art images. Someone with the desire might well take the time to become really literate in this area. This blesses the community with further resources. Many images are copyrighted but since a small community in worship will not be using them for commercial benefit, or publishing them in any way, it is appropriate to use them only for study purposes.²¹

The language of visual art, particularly as it relates to artworks from the Middle Ages, has largely been lost by contemporary Christians and needs to be re-learned. At the end of this paper there is a list of symbols and their meanings that has been gathered from a variety of sources with some dating from the nineteenth century. This is not a static list of symbols as each is anchored in the context of the artwork. For example, red is the colour of divine love and Jesus and Mary usually have some red in their clothing. However, red can also symbolise blood and war so the use of the colour in the context of the painting is important. In Mantegna’s 1457 painting of the crucifixion, the soldiers wear red. This indicates their violent actions against Jesus in the spilling of his blood and their particular warlike focus.

By using these interpretations of artistic symbols we can learn the visual vocabulary to enable us to ‘read’ and interact with the artwork chosen from Matthew 4:12-23, for example.

MATTHEW 4:12-23

Hearing that John had been arrested Jesus went back to Galilee, and leaving Nazareth he went and settled in Capernaum, a lakeside town on the borders of Zebulun and Naphtali. In this way the prophecy of Isaiah was to be fulfilled:

²⁰ Angela McCarthy, “Art for God or to God through Art?” in David J. Cohen & Michael Parsons eds. *In Praise of Worship: An Exploration of Text and Practice*, Eugene, Pickwick Publications, 2010), 169.

²¹ The website of the Australian Copyright Council is very useful for details. A website that is very useful in accessing such art is <http://www.textweek.com> as it has an art index with good links to many other sites. Other useful ones are www.artbible.net and www.biblical-art.com

Land of Zebulun! Land of Naphtali!
Way of the sea on the far side of Jordan,
Galilee of the nations!
The people that lived in darkness
has seen a great light;
on those who dwell in the land and shadow of death
a light has dawned.

From that moment Jesus began his preaching with the message, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is close at hand.' As he was walking by the Sea of Galilee he saw two brothers, Simon, who was called Peter, and his brother Andrew; they were making a cast in the lake with their net, for they were fishermen. And he said to them, 'Follow me and I will make you fishers of men.' And they left their nets at once and followed him.

Going on from there he saw another pair of brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John; they were in their boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. At once, leaving the boat and their father, they followed him.

He went round the whole of Galilee teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the Good News of the kingdom and curing all kinds of diseases and sickness among the people.

There are numerous defined processes that we can be used to effect an opening of Scripture through artworks. One such process is *Lectio Divina* which is an ancient form of reflecting on the word of God that has been renewed in practice in recent times. Such practice can be adapted for the use of images as well.²² This complements the act of reading sacred Scripture so that it becomes integrated into the spiritual experience. Artworks are human creations while sacred Scripture is inspired by God, but combined they can enliven faith through the word of God by using the mind and the senses while always being aware that Scripture is the most important component.

Lectio Divina has four prescribed stages. *Lectio* (reading), *meditatio* (meditation), *oratio* (prayer) and *contemplatio* (contemplation). In relation to art, the process might work as follows:

Reading

Begin with one person proclaiming the Gospel in the usual manner of worship. The one reading should not hurry but should proclaim the reading in a reverential manner. Following the reading, each person will engage in 'reading' the relevant artwork. This is done in silence with the image on screen or on individual copies. Allow the eye to wander over the artwork and become aware of where the artist's focus is placed. What journey does the eye take? What shapes are formed by the composition? What shapes do the coloured areas form? What do the colours mean? What gestures are apparent in the characters? What does the gesture mean? Who are the characters? How does the artist tell us which character is the most important? Using the list of symbols examine the story that is presented.

²² Sullivan, 33.

Meditation

The next stage requires us to view the artwork through the eyes of faith. The story is clearly in mind so now each person needs to consider the combination of text and image. The artist has focussed on a particular moment in the Gospel story, or there might be several different moments portrayed. What kind of image of God is portrayed? What aspects of humanity are revealed? Does this artwork say something about the connection between God and humankind? Where are we in this story? Spend time with the image and the text allowing the heart of faith to read both. What does the image and text invite you to believe?

Prayer

Prayer emanating from the reading and the meditation turns the theological and spiritual gleanings into a conversation with God. This can be shared prayer within the group. For example, what arises prayerfully by considering the call of Peter and Andrew? How does their discipleship influence us in our relationship with God? How can this be expressed in prayer? What is Christ calling us to do?

Contemplation

The final stage calls us to contemplate the artwork with the text in our mind. The community comes to silence again and quietly rests with the image, text, theology and the mystery of what has been given through this experience.

A further step to conclude could be an open reflection and discussion on what each person has gleaned from the process. Such a method can provoke surprising insights into a faith filled sharing of the Gospel.

While there are many artworks dealing with Matthew's account of Jesus calling Peter and Andrew, the ones below provide a contrast. Veneziano and Duccio are both from the Middle Ages while He Qi is a contemporary artist.

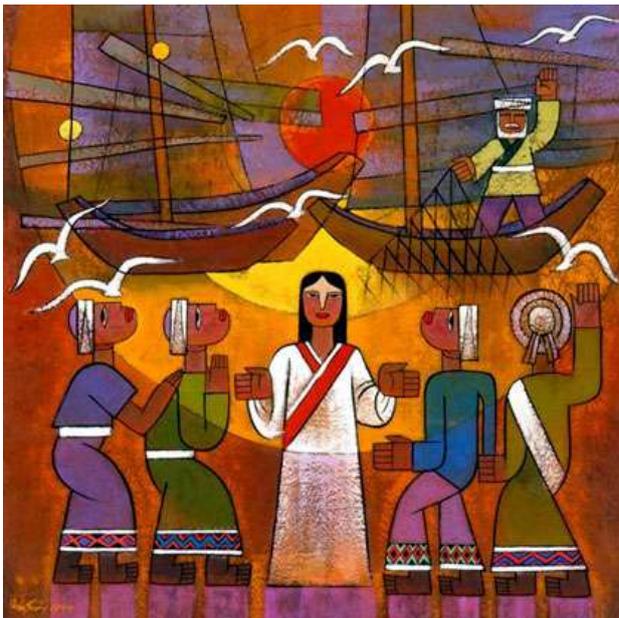
This paper has provided one way of enlivening the Gospel of the day for small communities who worship together, with or without a priest or pastor. It will enable the community to engage in deep reflection that has the resultant spiritual benefits. Good preparation and the careful selection of resources are important but the Gospel always paramount.



Calling of Apostles Peter and Andrew.
Lorenzo Veneziano.
c. 1370. Tempera on poplar panel, 23x33cm,
Staatliche Museen, Berlin.



Calling of Peter and Andrew
Duccio di Buoninsegna, 1308-11,
Tempera on wood.
National Gallery of Art, Washington
Part of a Maestà originally in the
Cathedral of Sienna.



Calling the disciples
He Qi (pron. Huh Chee)
20th century
Acrylic paint
www.asianchristianart.org

The list of symbols below have been gleaned from a large number of sources from 19th century onwards. They provide a guide only for ‘reading’ the artworks because the context of the work also has to be considered.

| Symbol | Meaning |
|------------------------------|--|
| Anchor | Steadfastness, hope |
| Architecture/building | House as a surrogate body which dignifies the body we have. The verandah or colonnade in the annunciation show openness/enclosure, seclusion/availability |
| Arms open | Compassion, compassionate stance |
| Bee | Activity, diligence, work, good order |
| Bells | Summons, Eucharist, getting rid of demons |
| Black | Mourning, sickness, negation and death. With white means humility and purity of life. |
| Blue | Divine truth, heaven and heavenly love. Also intellectual peace and contemplation. Faith, compassion and the waters of baptism. Colour associated with Christ and the Virgin Mary. |
| Book, text | The Word = Jesus, teachers, also announces people and what they say. For Mary, reinforces her intelligence – Jesus educated by Mary who knew she would carry the Word - Jesus |
| Brown | Spiritual death and degradation. Also colour of renunciation so order like the Franciscans and Capuchins wear brown. Also, the colour of humility as with St Joseph |
| Butterfly | Resurrection of Christ, resurrection of all people in the wider sense |
| Cauldron | St John the evangelist – dropped into a vat of oil |
| Chalice | Eucharist |
| Church | Christian faith, idea of locality |
| Circle | Infinity, perfection and the eternal. Often used as a symbol for God. |
| Collonade (Loggia) | An architectural feature that links past and present, interior to exterior. |
| Cross | Christ and martyrdom |
| Crown | Royalty, Queen of Heaven, Lord of Heaven, attribute of royal rank. Victory = laurel crown. Also symbol of martyrdom |
| Curtain | Domestic privacy. With Mary it is also about her virginity which has always been shielded |
| Dog | The dog of faithfulness, like a whippet, watchfulness and fidelity |
| Dolphin | Portrayed in Christian art more often than any other fish. Resurrection and salvation. Bearer of the souls of the dead across the water to the beyond. If with an anchor or boat, it symbolised the Christian soul or the Church being guided by Christ. |
| Donkey | Humblest of animals, present when Jesus was born and recognised him as the Son of God |
| Door | Barrier through which only the initiated can pass, opportunity, transition to a new state of being. Cathedral, three doors stand for faith, hope and charity. |
| Dove | Holy Spirit, finding safe place, power of God’s love |
| Dragon (Serpent) | Extension of serpent idea. St Margaret and St George, sin, devil, demons. The dragon is seen as the enemy of God. |
| Feathers | Lightness, speed. North America – Great Spirit of the sun. |
| Fire, flames | Fervour, divine love, Pentecost, torment of Hell |
| Fish | In Greek the letters of the words “fish” mean “Jesus Christ God’s Son Saviour” |
| Flaming heart | Old fashioned ultimate image of devotion, heart on fire for God. |
| Fruits and flowers | Roses and lilies = Mary, Peach = Jesus (often has one instead of Mary’s breast), God’s abundance |
| Garden | The enclosed garden is a symbol of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary (Song of Solomon 4:12) |
| Gold | Majesty, richness, eloquence, for Mary – gave birth to the Word |
| Green | Hope. Symbolises the triumph of life over death. A mixture of yellow and blue, the colours of charity and the regeneration of the soul through good works. The colour of water, St John the Baptist’s cloak, the colour of Epiphany. Colour of life in nature. |
| Halo, nimbus, glory, aureole | Divinity, presence of God in the person |
| Hand open | Giving blessing and welcome |
| Hart, hind, stag, deer | Monastic embodiment of piety, purity, will get away quickly to solitude. Ps42 – as a deer longs for running streams... |
| Lamb | OT sacrifice, alternative sacrifice for Abraham instead of his son Isaac, protected the Israelites from the Angel of Death, Jesus the Lamb slain for our sin. |
| Lamp | Christ, Light of the world, also signifies wisdom and piety. |
| Lily | Replaced olive branch by the Siennese – shows abundant love in choosing Mary at Annunciation. |
| Lion | Strength and steadfastness, courage, fortitude |
| Mountain | Meeting place of heaven and earth. Where Moses met God, where the Transfiguration was witnessed, where Jesus went to pray. |

| | |
|-------------------|--|
| Nativity | The delivery of God's love to us – incarnation |
| Olive | Peace branch, hope as in story of Noah, also divine abundance because so much goodness comes from such a small fruit |
| Palm, palm fronds | Martyrdom, victory over death. |
| Peacock | Immortality, from pagan mythology into Christian art – Christ reverses curses and gives us back immortality. Later a symbol of vanity and pride. |
| Pearl | Most precious jewel – symbol of salvation |
| Pelican | Self sacrifice. Christ like sacrifice. |
| Pincers, shears | St Apollonia had all her teeth pulled out – patron saint of dentists, Agnes – breasts cut off by shears – patron saint of breast cancer |
| Purple | Combines power and authority of red with the sanctity of blue – mystical colour. Colour of royalty because of expense of purple dye. Colour of God the Father. Penitence and sorrow. Liturgical colour for Advent and Lent. As violet, love and truth, or passion and suffering. Colour of Mary Magdalen and Mary Mother of God after the crucifixion. |
| Rabbit (hare) | Symbol of those who put the hope of their salvation in the Christ and His Passion. Also a symbol of lust and fecundity. A white hare is sometimes at the foot of Mary to indicate her triumph over lust. |
| Rainbow | Symbol of union, and because of the flood – pardon and reconciliation. Also a symbol of hope. Sometimes used as the Lord's throne. Ancient symbol of divine communication |
| Raven | Gift of prophecy, unwelcome kind, foreboding. Mortality. |
| Red | Divine love, the Holy Spirit. Colour of Christ's passion. Colour of blood, strength in both love and hate. Colour of St John the evangelist. Colour of the martyred saints – blood. Fire, Pentecost. Christ often in red. |
| Rivers | Four sacred rivers: Pison, Gihon, Tigris and Euphrates. Four rivers of paradise flowing from a single rock. Symbols of four gospels flowing from Christ. |
| Rocks | Symbol of the Lord, the rock from which the pure rivers of the Gospel flow |
| Shells | Pilgrimage, Spanish art |
| Ship | Noah, Church = safe haven from the world |
| Star | Symbol of divine guidance or favour. One star on Mary's veil is symbol of her virginity. 12 stars are for 12 apostles, and 12 tribes of Israel |
| Swallow | Renaissance symbol of Incarnation of Christ. Also of resurrection due to its hibernation in winter and emergence in spring. |
| Swan | Love and the gods. |
| Sword | Truth, martyrdom – St Michael – scales and sword |
| Tent | Darkness of the womb from which Christ came to life, in OT can relate to presence of God. |
| Throne/chair | Kingship |
| Tower | Holiness |
| Tree | Symbol of life or death depending on whether it is healthy and strong or withered. |
| Unicorn | Female purity |
| Water | Symbol of cleansing and purifying, baptism. In Eucharist the water mixed with wine represents Jesus' humanity mixed with the wine of his divinity. |
| Well | The well or fountain is the symbol of baptism, of life, rebirth. A flowing fountain symbolises the water of eternal life. A sealed well – virginity of Mary. |
| Wheels | St Catherine of Alexandria, burnt on wheel of fortune – pagan symbol |
| White | Resurrection, Virgin at the Annunciation, colour of innocence, purity and holiness, early Christian clergy. Transcendent. |
| Window | Our own consciousness looking out on the world. Admits the light of God to a church so also be a thing or person acting as vehicle for God. |
| Wings | Symbol of divine mission, messenger. |
| Yellow | Hints at gold, but also suggests faithlessness and betrayal. Colour of the sun therefore associated with divinity, colour of revealed truth – St Peter and St Joseph. Also the colour of infernal light, jealousy, betrayal and treason. Heresy and the plague. Judas the traitor. The context will determine the meaning. |